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Numbers crunching

By Tom Farrey
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Growing up across the 101 Freeway from Stanford University, where the sound of helicopters hunting gang members fill the night sky, Tehuna Mahoni never played sports on a regular basis. Her Tongan immigrant parents worked long hours trying to make a life for their four children, and found no room in their schedules for the games and ever-increasing commitments of youth sports.

In elementary school, Tehuna missed out on the early exposure to sports such as soccer and lacrosse that are so popular in wealthier surrounding towns. When she got to middle school, so scant was her classmates' interest in sports -- other than chasing boys, that is -- there were no teams for girls.

But in the race for a college athletic scholarship, Tehuna, now 13 and facing a series of life choices, has one advantage: She knows with scientific precision the sports and disciplines to which she is best tailored.

They are, in order:

1) Track and field -- Discus 2) Softball -- Catcher 3) Softball -- First base 4) Track and field -- Javelin 5) Rowing -- Open

The recommendations are right there on Tehuna's [personalized Sports Potential evaluation](#), accessible on the Web.

"I'm going to give discus a try," she says, "even though I haven't heard of the sport."

Through an after-school program in East Palo Alto, Calif., Tehuna won an essay contest that gave her free access to the scientists at Sports Potential, a local startup company that usually charges up to \$250 for an assessment of physical and athletic ability. The company pulled out the measuring tape, fired up the handheld computer, and put the tall, thick-boned girl through a battery of 30 tests that makes the NFL combine seem cursory.

They calculated the circumference of her calves and biceps, the breadth of her hips, the length and flexibility of her legs, the span of her arms, the size of her hands and shoes, her resting heart rate, body-fat percentage, and height and weight.

They checked her balance with a wobble board. Her concentration with a visual memory quiz. Endurance with a shuttle run. Agility with a one-turn exercise. Grip strength with a hydraulic gadget. Reflexes with a yardstick dropped between her thumb and index finger. Coordination with a ladder test. Speed with a 25-meter sprint. Vertical leap with a measuring device.

Then the scientists fed that raw data into a computer program that compared Tehuna's characteristics to her age peers, as well as elite athletes from 50 sports and 100 positions. Administrators from Sports Potential collected the base information over the past three years from pro, college and national team athletes.

"It's adding a little bit of science to the process of sport selection, as opposed to it being completely driven by luck and socio-economics," says Steve Spinner, founder and president of the company.

Growing up on New York's Long Island, Spinner discovered his best sport by chance. He was playing middle-school soccer when the high school track coach stopped by and noticed that Spinner, after three hours of running, was barely winded. The coach challenged him to try cross country. He made the high school team, then went on to run in college. "I said this is great, but isn't there a better way that I could have found out about this talent for endurance sports?" Spinner says.

Two decades later, Sports Potential is his answer. Launched in December by Spinner, a former Internet executive who hired sports scientists to provide the expertise he lacked, the company offers its product in a small but growing number of health clubs across the country. Backed by former U.S. senator and Basketball Hall of Famer Bill Bradley, who chairs its advisory board, the company also wants schools to adopt the assessment as a means to address the obesity epidemic, by getting kids like Tehuna involved in sports.

Ana Mahoni, Tehuna's mom, sees financial and academic benefits, too.

"Hopefully Tehuna will get recognized by someone willing to train her, that she'll get good at it, and then down the line probably get a college scholarship," Ana says.

Though late to play sports, Tehuna would seem to have a chance, based on her raw material. With calf, hip and hand sizes in the top 10 percentile for girls her age, she has an ideal physique for softball, according to her Sports Potential profile. Indeed, twice in middle school, competing on a lark, she won first place in softball throwing contests. "But I don't like the game," she says.

More to the point: She doesn't like objects being thrown at her, a fear she noted in her Sports Potential questionnaire. So besides softball, the ice hockey and lacrosse recommendations in her chart are highlighted in red, suggesting sports she could excel in -- if she confronts her fear. And if she gets training, of course.

Tehuna's assessment includes a list of local clubs and facilities where she can find coaching in specific

sports. Eventually, Spinner wants to get the individual national governing bodies of sports to subsidize the training of athletes who take his tests, in exchange for Sports Potential identifying potential stars of the future.

Spinner knows that bears the faint echo of the former government-run, Eastern Bloc sports factories. "Those [systems] were all about taking choices away from people and pushing them to do something whether they had an interest in doing it or not," he says. "We're an American company trying to do it the American way. It's an opt-in service that someone can choose to pay to take. It's information, not decision-making."

As for Tehuna, she plans to act on the recommendations when high school begins in September. And not just because she likes sports. Or because success could pay for college. Called "Shyness" by some classmates, a nickname tattooed on her right forearm, the big girl with the soft black eyes is starting to feel like she's ready to do something with all of that natural power.

"I just want to be really good at one sport," she says. "And to be outgoing."

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